

Melvin Van Peebles: Eccentric, But Honest!: FEATURE

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By TIMOTHY COX
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Prior to phoning Melvin Van Peebles at his Midtown Manhattan apartment, I had been forewarned that the interview may be challenging due to the subject's reported eccentric personality.

Not only were the warnings accurate, but Van Peebles proved to be earthy, humorous (quite bizarre), straight-forward and importantly, honest. At 53, Melvin Van Peebles has already earned the right to be regarded as one of the all-time great American writers.

FEATURE

Van Peebles will make an appearance here Thursday, Feb. 27, as guest lecturer during a tribute to some of his films. David Lawrence Auditorium is where such classics as 'Story of a 3-Day Pass' and 'James Weldon Johnson' can be witnessed free on the Pitt campus. The films are being presented as a part of the month long Black History series, 'Just Beneath The Surface.' The Van Peebles event commences at 9 p.m.

Asked whether he felt he should be more widely-recognized in major, literary/cinematic circles, Van Peebles casually remarked, "I'm just gonna do what I'm gonna do anyhow. I ain't gonna worry over it. The society we live in—how can we expect justice, when what surrounds us is surely not the case. It's clear the things I've done is larger..." he pondered. "I was the first Black to make a feature film," he stated. Upon questioning, he clarified that



GENIUS!—Melvin Van Peebles is regarded as one of America's literary giants.

remark and added he was the first since the Oscar Micheaux days. Micheaux was the black producer who filmed all-black casts earlier this century. In an expressive tone, Van Peebles continued his thought. "What the heck," he says. "You'd be foolish to expect your dues."

While the South Side Chicago native is most popular for his 1971 film, 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song,' he has also recorded albums, written movie scores and wrote 'The Apple Stretching,' a hit from a 1982 Grace Jones LP. But these days, Van Peebles likes to talk about life on the American Stock Exchange. For the past four years, he's been a trader on Wall Street, and recently authored a book, 'Bold Money,' which explains "how to make money." Van Peebles reveals that life as a trader and his creative world are "quite the opposite." The fact that he's made the successful transition to another line of work has "freaked everybody out," he says. And how did he do it? "I lost a bet with a guy, so I had to teach myself (what to do). I spent time there in that atmosphere, read books and just crammed."

How was his interest in screen-writing spurred early on? "I got tired of looking at things that weren't relative to us. It was a reaction against seeing us throwing our spears down (Tarzan-like films) and running. Whatever movies that had Blacks in it, I looked at it. Then I'd say, 'that ain't me!'"

How does such a multi-talented, genius of a man label himself: writer, producer, musician, artist? "A survivor," he laughs. "Seriously, I don't think about it a lot. You do

what you can." Van Peebles' most recent TV movie was the two-day mini-series, 'Sophisticated Gents,' which he conceived and starred in in 1984. It featured an all-star cast.

After living in Europe for 10 years and Mexico, Van Peebles' 'Story of a 3-Day Pass' won awards in the Cannes Film Festival (France), and Melvin returned back to the States as an internationally-acclaimed screenwriter. The former postal worker recalls passing through Pittsburgh in 1952 while motorbiking, ("just on one of my jaunts"). He left Chicago at 16. Prying any more background information from him was impossible. "I don't discuss those things." He said his rationale was based on the fact that youths will mistakenly look upon his individual accomplishments, and alienate themselves from the idea that they too can accomplish the same.

"I'm trying to focus young peoples' minds on the similarities, rather than the dissimilarities. We all have the same black experience. That's what I try to concentrate on. I don't want to be special." Van Peebles viewpoint on the controversy surrounding 'The Color Purple': "I don't discuss anyone else's gig!"

Did Melvin consciously prepare sons, Mario, Max and daughter, Megan for acting/modeling/performance careers? "No, I saw that their teeth were straightened, and ears were washed. They're not bothering me for money." He did add that he wasn't married, and that all three children have different mothers. "My status is hermit... just a happy hermit. I don't bother nobody and nobody bothers me."

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you like brother Van Peebles' work or you despise it. "Sweet Back" was for many the beginning of the awful blaxploitation trend in films. For me Melvin's first film marked the birth of a new Black cinema. It was the first time the Black Arts of the street were forthrightly brought to the screen and put to good use. "Sweet Back" was daring and dangerously alive because it was so gloriously infested with the black rage of its writer, producer, director, musician and star, Melvin Van Peebles.

Well, Melvin has done it again; only this time he's done it on the stage. Hiding away at the Hill House Auditorium for a limited three day engagement was Melvin (the magnificent) Van Peebles' miraculous street musical "Ain't Suppose To Die A Natural Death." This is the first time the play has been brought to Pittsburgh and perhaps the first it's been produced, and performed within that very community it so accurately tries to recreate.

The cast actually stars the Black community because the actors are predominantly just brothers and sisters who once probably hung out on the streets. I think Van Peebles would rather have it this way for their presence lends a greater authenticity to the roles. You don't have to wade through thick layers of arrogant actors' vanity to get at the inner conflicts of the basic characters.

Again Melvin has drawn on Black culture and life styles of the streets which he apparently loves, values, and regards as a viable reserve from which one can obtain Black art. He is just about the only artist presently working with a large following who apparently believes that the lives of junkies, prostitutes, pimps, lesbians, etc., are worth listening to, and well worth saving. Each of the major characters are allowed a monologue or two in which they pour out their hearts in hopes that we might understand or sympathize with them.

Van Peebles' ignoble characters of human imperfections are passionately real and life like and he makes us face them, for he knows that a people can only be beautiful after they face the truth about themselves. When we leave the theater the sordid indelible images of Van Peebles' pimps, whores, and corrupt cops stay with us like the lingering rank smell of chittlin's, black eyed peas and stale beer after a New Year's Eve party. We learn from this play that Black art is not something we get and then leave in a theater. It is like experiencing starvation; it is hard to shake off and even harder to forget.

This is accomplished through the sheer rage

tors. They confront the audience with their chest proudly poked out and their heads gallantly held high. They spurn the pungent lyrics like bullets flying from a rapid firing machine gun. There is the weary black worker walking home from a hard days work in white America, "If I walk slow," he moans, "I'm loiterin'...run. I'm escapin'...frown, I'm hostile, and grin. I'm a Tom. It just don't make no sense, the way these feet are hurtin' me." There is a distressed black woman leaning over a high fire escape contemplating the loss of her man. "Take your hands of me mister I ain't jumpin'." I'm leaning over... If I didn't leap when Medgar got your message — or Malcom — or Martin Luther King — take your hands off me — I ain't gonna do it now..."

Many complain about "Ain't Suppose To Die A Natural Death" for it does not have a comfortable, safe, positive view of ghetto dwellers in the black community, but this is precisely what makes it so immediate, and exciting because this makes the audience sit up and take notice. There is a blind beggar hopelessly infatuated with a perfumed homosexual, and a manish lesbian pathetically in love with a downtrodden prostitute, who in turn is desperately devoted to a whore pommeling pimp. There is sexy Lillie dancing the "zampoughi" every time "her coat tail is pulled" and a sharp chick called Brown Sugar who is told to "smile" as she is sexually humiliated. Although it may sound negative, it's so effectively and touchingly done that it gives you new insights into the black human condition.

The production was plagued with all sorts of problems. There was opening night postponement, inclement weather, an almost inaudible sound system, sparse audience attendance, and competition with the Christmas Season (at this time of year people are spending money on gifts, not plays). Nevertheless the director Claude Purde has surmounted these obstacles admirably. He has a fine eye for detail. For example a young black militant wears a dishiki and sells earrings. As a brother hustles Muhammad Speaks, a junkie snatches an old lady's purse. The director's blocking and choreography of the imaginary pimp moble is a stroke of genius. Now that the production has finally arrived on the Hill House stage, it is only running for three days. I hope that someone or someplace will take the initiative to give this ghetto musical a well deserved significant second run. Cause good plays just ain't suppose to die unnatural, untimely deaths.